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## **West Nile Virus: A Constant Presence New River Health District Says Report Dead Birds But Testing Not Necessary**

Spring is a wonderful time of the year that brings warm days, the scent of honeysuckle wafting over the countryside, numerous outdoor events, and an increased risk of exposure to West Nile virus. Dr. Jody Hershey, Director of the New River Health District, explains that West Nile virus has become “endemic” in the New River Valley, in Virginia, and throughout many parts of the United States. “West Nile virus is permanently established in the United States, including southwestern Virginia and the New River Health District,” says Dr. Hershey.

“Citizens play a significant role in preventing West Nile virus,” says Hershey. “Studies of mosquito species that carry West Nile virus in the New River Health District (and southwest Virginia) show that most breed in containers and ground pools. Therefore, elimination of mosquito breeding areas around the home, eliminating or treating standing water on public/private property, and protecting oneself against mosquito bites while outside are the best ways to control mosquitoes and reduce the risk of West Nile virus infection in the New River Valley,” Hershey says.

Mosquitoes can breed in standing water in as little as one week. Citizens can prevent mosquitoes from multiplying by “tipping and tossing” containers of standing water or removing containers around the home where water collects, such as old tires, potted plant trays, buckets, and toys. People also should clean birdbaths and wading pools once a week, and clean out clogged roof gutters and downspouts regularly. Eliminating water on tarps or flat roofs also helps to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds. Also, keeping window and door screens in good repair will prevent mosquitoes from entering your home.

The New River Health District recommends the following tips to reduce personal exposure to mosquitoes:

- Wear long, loose and light-colored clothing.
- Use insect repellent products with no more than 50% DEET for adults and no more than 30% for children. Follow instructions when using insect repellents.
- Use yellow bug lights for outdoor lighting.

Katherine McCombs, District Epidemiologist, adds that, “Some mosquito species that are found in the New River Valley and other areas of southwest Virginia can bite during the day, so citizens need to use mosquito protection during the day, as well as the evening when other species of mosquitoes are active.”

West Nile virus is spread to birds, humans, horses, and other mammals through the bite of an infected mosquito. Most people bitten by an infected mosquito do not get sick. People who do get sick usually

suffer a mild flu-like illness that may include fever, muscle aches, swollen lymph glands, and sometimes a skin rash. People over age 50 and those with a weakened immune system are at greatest risk of serious illness--such as encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) or meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord). There is no specific treatment for West Nile virus and supportive therapy is used in more severe cases. Most people recover from the illness. There is currently no licensed vaccine to protect against this virus available in the U.S.

“Again this year, the New River Health District is asking local citizens to continue to report all dead birds to their local health departments, but to understand that these dead birds will not be collected and tested for West Nile virus because we know that West Nile Virus is endemic in the bird population. Collecting and testing of these birds is not the best use of our limited resources,” says McCombs.

“Our local health departments will continue to record citizen reports of dead birds. The Virginia Department of Health will be compiling data on sightings of dead birds throughout Virginia,” says Hershey.

“The Virginia Department of Health did not routinely collect and test birds for WNV last year” explains McCombs. In the New River Health District--the counties of Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, and Pulaski, and the city of Radford--one horse in Montgomery County was confirmed with West Nile virus.

In Virginia, five human cases were reported in 2004. No human cases of West Nile virus have ever been reported in the New River Health District. However, there was one documented human case last year in nearby Roanoke city. West Nile virus was first detected in Virginia in the fall of 2000.